HISTORY IN PRACTICE

⬭ ○ "HANGIN' OUT" AND "YARNIN'"

REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCE OF COLLECTING ORAL HISTORIES

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> With this paper Lorina Barker, a PhD candidate in History at the University of New England, won the inaugural 2007 John Ferry Prize for Local and Community Histories. The prize is offered by the NSW History Council in memory of John Ferry (1949–2004), an exemplary teacher and community historian, and lecturer at the University of New England. See www.historycouncilnsw.org.au/prizes_johnferryaward.html.

Weilmoringle or Wayilmarrangkalku means 'old man saltbush' in the Muruwari language. It is a remote Aboriginal community and pastoral property two-hours northeast of Bourke and it is where I grew up. This article explores my ambivalent feelings, triggered by returning there after many years away. In collecting oral histories for community/family research, I am faced with many social and ethical issues, as well as personal ones. I am learning much about the impediments to the application of oral history methods and approaches, which arise from the multiple and interchangeable roles and responsibilities of the researcher as a community person, family member, and researcher. Through 'hangin' out' at Weilmoringle, trying to learn about other people's connections and disconnections to place, I have begun my own journey of rediscovery and reconnection.

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> FIELDWORK is fun; it is easy; anyone can do it; it is salutary for young academics to flee the nest; and they should be able to take any moral or political dilemma encountered in their stride (Punch 1994: 93).

This paper is a preliminary report on some of the challenges experienced in the field, particularly the social and ethical issues associated with collecting oral histories for community/family research. Through the process of exploring and reflecting on my fieldwork I seek to understand how and to what extent these challenges impede the application of oral history methods and approaches, blur ethical parameters and trigger conflict between professional and personal roles. The discussion focuses on the idea of 'hangin' out' in the community; the interpersonal relationships between the researcher and participants; the strengths and weaknesses of insider/outsider perspectives; and the multiple and interchangeable roles and responsibilities of the researcher as a community person, family member, and researcher.

THE JOURNEY BACK

I am a descendant of the Muruwari people through paternal lineage, and my childhood days were spent growing up at a place called Weilmoringle in Muruwari country, in western New South Wales, and therefore as an insider of the community. However, at the age of 13 I was physically removed from people and place, a decision made by my parents for educational reasons. Later I chose to further remove myself from the community after gaining admission to university, and this year it will be the twentieth year that I have been separated from people and place, and thus proclaim myself an outsider.

The experience of going home to Weilmoringle to attend a reunion in 2002 left me with a confused sense of at once belonging to place and of being disconnected from the people. The memories of people and place seem to be lost in a time on which the present is superimposed. That is, while I have an affiliation with this place as a child, as an adult there seems to be no attachment or familiarity. This led me to question my own experience about connection to and memories of place. I wondered whether other people from my community had similar experiences, and if so how did they respond, what strategies did they employ to deal with their mixed-emotions, and why did they or indeed did they want to rediscover place and reconnect to people.

Since commencing the data collection stage, I have journeyed back to Weilmoringle, Bourke, Brewarrina and Enngonia interviewing people and collecting oral histories. The research methods I have employed are a combination of formal and informal interviewing techniques used in both individual and group sessions. Also, where necessary I have remodelled the methodology, so that it readily applies to my community and my family.

RETRACING AND REPLANNING THE JOURNEY BACK

To date I have undertaken three fieldwork trips. The first took place mid-2005, for the purpose of explaining the research project, to identify prospective participants, and to gather community support, as well as to interview a few people. During this time, I conducted several individual interviews with local people in Bourke which allowed me to 'rehearse and refine'my methods and interview technique (Bell 2001: 4). Upon returning to UNE, I immediately began reflecting on the fieldwork. These reflections included my unrealistic expectations, the university's ethical guidelines, my family/community obligations, and my methodological approach. I soon realised that I had weighed everything against and had become too distracted by the university's ethical guidelines and in so doing, neglected to consider what would or would not work in the communities, and with whom. This in turn affected my productivity and relationship with participants, as I constantly worried about the formalities of meeting times, and whether I was doing it the 'right way'. As a result, opportunities were lost and conversations missed. As Alistair Thomson points out 'there is no single 'right way' to do an interview', instead one must recognise ' that the interview is a relationship embedded within particular cultural practices and informed by culturally specific systems and relations of communication' (Thomson 1999: 82).

THE IVORY TOWER EFFECT

The ivory tower effect is a metaphor I use to describe the process by which people from afar plan and make decisions about a proposed research project or policy, and do so with little or no consultation with the people whom it will affect and with limited understanding of how the chosen community functions. Like 'the suits' in Canberra I too am guilty of the ivory tower effect. For several weeks I sat in my comfortable little office at UNE organising equipment, arranging the itinerary and setting up community meetings to raise awareness and inspire participation. I remember both my supervisors cautioning me about having too many expectations, and reminding me of the time and distance involved in such an undertaking. Whilst in their company I agreed in principle, but soon reverted to my original plans, reassuring myself 'it was all possible'. Today, I continue to have mixed-emotions about the itineraries I had planned, and have asked myself 'what was I thinking?' Was I so wrapped-up in academia and the formalities of research that I

had forgotten my community and how it works? Why did I not consider the distance between each town? It is ludicrous and quite dangerous to intend, least of all attempt, to travel and conduct interviews in four different locations. While these itineraries are a good example of what not to do, they are a source of data on which to work and develop innovative research methods and approaches that are both culturally appropriate and academically sound.

Later in 2005, I went 'outback' for the second time to attend the week long Yaama Festival, to collect oral testimonies and to carry out follow-up sessions. I was determined from the outset that I would try to relax, to work intuitively and instinctively, to do things 'my way' and 'the way' that was culturally appropriate for each community. But first I had to make a few changes in regards to my own attitude towards, and practice of, fieldwork. To a certain degree this had occurred. I went out a week before to attend the Yaama festival, the idea being that I would relax, spend time and yarn with people, to 'hang out', be a part of, and get involved in, community events or functions. This was a decision which proved to be very beneficial when identifying prospective participants. Indeed some people were mindful of what I was doing, and were more approachable and interested in becoming involved as either a participant or a source of information. During this trip, I laid the foundations on which good working relationships could develop and flourish, ones based on respect and trust.

'HANGIN' OUT' IN THE FIELD

The main focus of this paper is the third and most recent fieldwork conducted in January/February 2006. I spent four weeks negotiating and collecting oral histories. This trip provided the space and time to re-engage, to build on existing relationships, and to develop a sense of trust between the participants and myself. Much of this time was spent 'hangin' out' and 'yarnin'' with participants in their homes, at the local pub/club, driving around town and attending family/community functions. I first heard of the term 'hanging out' when I explained to one of my supervisors what it was that I was doing in the field. I later discovered that researchers undertaking qualitative studies were also using it as a method of inquiry in both formal and informal settings. Kerith Power, in her research with Minimbah School, claimed her fieldwork involved 'deep hanging out' with the research subjects (Power 1999: 1). Similarly, anthropologists commonly use the term 'hanging out' to describe a research technique, the process of cultural immersion by the researcher in the field. Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist with Intel Communications, explains 'deep hanging out' as '... based on the idea that you best absorb a culture by being there and doing it... You've got to actually be there, hang out with people, and participate in their daily activities' (Bell 2006). It is here that I have adapted the anthropological use of the term 'hanging out' which involves participant observation, to my use of hangin' out to mean, hangin' out in my community, and with my family yarnin' and catchin' up. The dropping of the 'g' is used here to emphasise the Aboriginal ways of speaking, better known as Aboriginal English. Diana Eades explains, 'two people can speak exactly the same words, with the same grammar, but if their cultures are different then they won't have the same meaning'. She adds that interpreting each other's speech is more than 'words and grammar, [i]t's all tied up with the way people relate to each other, the way people act and think about the world – in other words their culture' (Eades 1985: 24).

As a researcher 'hangin' out' in the field provided a space to re-immerse myself in the culture/community, and to participate in different activities, while at the same time observe and listen to people's stories and memories. More importantly, the practice of 'hangin' out' allowed individual participants to accommodate my research into their every day lives. The ritual of 'catchin' up' offered an opportunity for the researcher and participants to get to know one another both on a professional level, as researcher and participant, and informally as community people, insiders, sharing memories and stories of Weilmoringle and some aspect of our lives. 'Hangin' out' was not deliberate, but rather an unconscious and natural act, part of the 'ways of knowing', 'ways of being' and 'ways of doing' in one's own cultural and social spaces (Martin 2006). At times, in order to engage a participant I had to first hang out, have a yarn, a meal, or partake in various social activities: playing cards, having a flutter on the pokies, or socialising at the local pub/club. These prior engagements ensured that on the day of the interview the participant and I were more familiar and comfortable with each other. Most importantly the participant understood a little of what the research was about, having spent the previous day 'hangin' out', and had the time to consider the interview questions and possible responses. This 'thinking time' provided a breathing space for the participant to decide on whether to agree or refuse an interview. In most cases the participants were more open to the idea of an interview, and agreed to participate.

COLLECTING ORAL HISTORIES

Collecting oral histories is no easy task. Indeed, for an early-career researcher it is a daunting, overwhelming and exhausting experience, one that carries many personal obligations and professional responsibilities. By professional I mean the ethical standards set by the institution as a guide for researchers to conduct themselves in an ethical fashion, and to be ethically accountable to communities, participants, and the academy. By the personal I mean family/community obligations and the implications for interpersonal relationships.

In a discussion paper, Valerie Yow considers some of the ethical problems involved in oral history research and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. She claims there is no one solution for these problems, though she does provide some suggestions on how to deal with conflicting responsibilities, particularly when friendships develop between the researcher and interviewee, blurring the private and professional (Yow 1995: 57). Yow interviewed a researcher who had 'asked an [elderly woman], to accompany him to some interviews with people whom she knew'. The respondent explained his intentions: '[h]aving Ina along provided a natural entré to narrators who would have been difficult if not impossible for me as a stranger in the area to approach in successful terms'. Though no stranger to the communities in which I worked, this was a practice I too employed when scheduling interviews with prospective participants. Family members and friends provided access to possible participants, becoming the entrée in my re-introduction to the community, the bridge re-connecting me to possible participants, and re-explaining my research intentions to participants. After each field trip, I realised just how dependent on my family I had become, and it was apparent that I needed them. These feelings of dependency were the source of great concern and self-questioning of my abilities as a researcher, and the multiple roles and responsibilities with which I found myself, anxious to know 'what was the right thing to do?'

At times this co-dependency blurred the boundaries between my role as researcher and my family obligations, a dependency whereby the family expectations are more important than your own wants and needs. In these situations as I was repeatedly reminded by family members of my place and family obligations I would try to reassure myself to 'go with the flow'. During one particular trip to a scheduled interview I was asked to go via a family member's place, to give them a lift to town, which was on the way to the interview location. Aware of my annoyance, I was reminded by my brother to 'relax, stop worrying about the time, you know what people are like'.[1] This was easy for him to say, when I was the one whose credibility was on the line. I pulled up outside the interview place and my brother insisted 'I'll go in and tell them you'll be back in five'. A little relieved that they agreed to see me later, I completed the family errand and quickly returned. I was surprised, upon returning, to learn that the group of participants were also running late and had forgotten about the scheduled meeting. Afterwards I realised how important it was to have a family member provide insight into how organizations and community people function, especially when factoring in time. In retrospect my brother had reinforced that we were in fact, 'running on black fullas' time'.

This was not always the case: some interview opportunities were missed and interview days and times confused because of family obligations. For some participants time was crucial, as it would take only a matter of minutes before they lost interest, got tired of waiting, or left the interview place altogether. As Yow points out, as the researcher it was my responsibility to establish and maintain boundaries and clarify expectations, 'so that no one is taken advantage of, no one's feelings are hurt'(Yow 1995: 57). Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights the need for insider researchers to consider developing support mechanisms, and the consequences of their actions, given that the insider/outsider model is problematic within an Indigenous context. Insider researchers, Tuhiwai Smith explains,

> have to have ways of thinking critically about their processes, their relationships
> and the quality and richness of their data and analysis... the major difference
> [between the insider and the outsider] is that insiders have to live with the
> consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do
> their families and communities (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 137).

THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

It is important then to define the insider/outsider perspectives, which will further explain and clarify my positioning within the context of this research. At this point in time and at this stage of the research I have positioned myself as an insider/outsider. As mentioned earlier in this paper, I am a descendant of the Muruwari people of Weilmoringle, and thus an insider to the community. However, as a result of educational opportunities, I was twice removed from people and place, first by my parents who decided that it would be in my best interest to attend secondary education in Bourke; the second, a decision all my own, was to continue my studies in higher education. Today, it is my choice to live and work outside my community. In this context I thus consider myself an outsider.

WHERE AM I IN ALL OF THIS? THE INSIDER

The ability to move simultaneously from insider to outsider (Kikumura 1998: 142) was un-doubtedly an advantage in the collection of field data. As an insider I am aware of and understand the intricate make-up of the community, that is, the politics and social interactions of various groups of people. I am conscious of family alignments and associations and privy to family in-formation and knowledge. As an insider, I am immediately associated with a particular family, which can be both a strength and a weakness, depending on the individual, the community in which they live and social and political factors that permeate their every day lives.

As the perceived insider I also experienced the limitations of interviewing community and family members, and burden of the social and cultural knowledge one is presumed to possess. The most common response I received when discussing and negotiating the research with pro-spective participants was, 'we grew up together, you already know about me. What else can I tell you?'[2] During an interview with an uncle, our conversation became repeatedly strained and uncomfortable; the participant refused to tell or left out certain aspects of his story because he did not consider them to be of particular importance, or he assumed that I already knew. As a result, time after time I had to stop recording. During the intervals, he would confirm my questions and his response to them, inquiring 'what else do you want to know?' or 'you know about that, I don't have to tell you again'.[3] After I explained the importance of hearing his version, and with some gentle coercion, he repeated the story and I captured his voice on tape.

Akemi Kikumura encountered the same limitations of the insider perspective when she inter-viewed her mother, 'an Issei woman, from Hiroshima, Japan, who had immigrated to the United States in 1923' (Kikumura 1998: 140). Kikumura explains that insider perspectives 'limit my access to certain types of information, [as the] participant assumes that [I] already know about past events and do not need to be told' (Kikumura 1998: 141). Belinda Bozzoli discovered how an insider's assumed knowledge can also hinder the interview experience for both the participant and researcher. Bozzoli wrote about Mmantho Nkotsoe, a research assistant and an insider to the South African village of Phokeng,

> [s]ometimes this rapport fails, and the interviewee gets irritated with Mmantho
> because she hasn't indicated the common ground the subject thought they both
> possessed; or Mmantho finds her question gets the 'wrong' answer, because
> she has assumed common ground that does not exist (Bozzoli 1998: 150).

It is assumed that as an insider Mmantho is familiar with the intricacies of Phokeng, no matter how considerable or insignificant the information may be.

WHERE AM I IN ALL OF THIS? THE OUTSIDER

The strengths and weaknesses of the outsider perspective are best explained by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who shared her experience as a first time researcher 'with a group of Maori mothers and children who had formed a Maori "language nest"' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 137). This was a group with whom she had links both culturally and socially and, from the outset, she was clearly an insider, but as discussions about the research commenced her outsider status became more obvious. She wrote,

> I became much more aware of the things which made me an outsider. I was
> attending university as a graduate student; I had worked for several years as a
> teacher and had a professional income; I had a husband; and we owned a car
> which was second-hand but actually registered (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 138).

As I completed each block of fieldwork and started another field trip, like Tuhiwai Smith I also noticed the things that made me an outsider: I live outside my community, I work and earn a regular income which supports my postgraduate studies and the life style I have become accustomed to. My self-perception as an outsider was also reinforced by the questioning looks and comments people made as I drove around in the university 4-wheel-drive vehicle. The people inquired, 'Do you own it or is it a work car?', 'I thought you were the Medical Centre people', 'Your car looks like a police car'.[4] While individuals adhered to the social and cultural courtesy of offering me a refreshing drink or a meal, they also considered the interview to be a formal meeting. To accommodate the outsider, some participants organised a formal setting – at a table or in a quiet room in the house, while others informed family and friends of their daily engagement, and some had made prior arrangements for a family member to baby-sit their children.

On the other hand, the outsider position provides the space to enable me to collect and reflect on my field experiences, and the objectivity to interpret, analyse and present the research findings, which are intended to be both culturally appropriate and academically grounded. The outsider perspective is a method of inquiry for which Kikumura provides an unequivocal endorsement:

> advocates for the outsider perspective generally argue that access to authentic
> knowledge is more obtainable because of the objectivity and scientific detach-
> ment with which one can approach one's investigation as a nonmember of the
> group (Kikumura 1998: 140).

THE DYNAMICS

The following example demonstrates the sometimes very problematic dynamics with which the participants and I engaged. After an interview with an elderly male, I reflected on and questioned the appropriateness of my approaching and engaging that person in conversation. It is important to mention that, while I initiated the interview, my subject had insisted on doing the interview and had assured me that he was familiar with the process. Throughout the session I noticed that he was nervous and uncomfortable; his expression suggested careful thought about his responses, indicative, perhaps of his prerogative to choose what information to share and what to withhold. But, once the tape ceased recording, our conversation continued in a more relaxed fashion and he insisted on showing me some of his photographs, which were neatly arranged in a blue plastic document folder. The storying of the photographs provided a rich and detailed account of his early work life on a sheep station. It was not until the following day that I was reminded of cultural protocols by my father, who reprimanded me and took it upon himself to educate me in the 'right way' of doing things. He firmly explained that I should not have interviewed this person on his own, but instead should have arranged for the participant to be interviewed together with his brother, further suggesting that he (Dad) arrange and attend future sessions. My father's given reasons were to ensure that each participant was comfortable, that the group session would help participants to remember the past, and that each participant would be better able to assist

and confirm the other's memories. I suspected, though Dad neither confirmed nor denied it, that a one-on-one interview with a male elder was not culturally appropriate. In hindsight, my father was re-educating me about cultural protocols on what was considered 'proper' behaviour, especially when interacting with the opposite sex. Why did I not consider the dynamics of this interview situation and the benefits of including others? These are questions I will need to consider when arranging future interviews, in this case, gender implications.

A few days later, with assistance from my father, I conducted a group session with three men, which also included Dad. The men in this group helped to trigger each other's memories with 'remember the time' prompts, conversing with each other, and often forgetting that they were being recorded. When they wanted me to know something they considered important they would look at each other and say 'tell her about that time', turning to me, the speaker would tell the story, reaffirming 'that's how it was back then'.[5] The dynamics in this group worked well because the men shared many common characteristics: they were very close in age, had had similar experiences growing up and working together, and they had lived and raised all their children at Weilmoringle. The success of this interview is therefore attributed to group dynamics. As Hugo Slim and Paul Thomson have argued, individual interviews are 'potentially a "dangerously intimate encounter" … and that group remembering may be a more acceptable and familiar approach in certain societies' (cited in Thomson 1999: 83).

During the last two weeks of fieldwork, I became more aware of how certain family members' roles and attitudes had changed toward the research. My father became my mentor, as a means of ensuring cultural protocols were followed, and my mother, brothers, aunties and cousins all acted as research assistants re-introducing me to the community and providing access to prospective participants.

CONCLUSION

I initially thought, rather naively, that collecting oral testimonies from family/community members would be straight forward, and unproblematic. I was not in the least prepared for the fact that the fieldwork would raise methodological, ethical and social concerns. In this paper, I have outlined my reflective process of self-exploration and critical analysis, providing an account of how I engaged participants formally and informally. In doing so, I have revealed a small part of my journey in a personal story of the challenges, interspersed with a few moments of success. Reflecting on my field experiences has taught me to consider every encounter and conversation as potential research data. And more importantly I have learnt to identify and share problems with other scholars and fellow PhD students, to encourage dialogue and to learn from the experience.

ENDNOTES

[1] Personal Communication, 27 January 2006.

[2] Personal Communication, January/February 2006.

[3] Personal Communication, 27 January 2006.

[4] Personal Communication, January/February 2006.

[5] Personal Communication, 14 February 2006.

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